

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

IS THE CURRENT ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE AN
AIR FORCE OF STRATEGIC INFLUENCE?

by

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Biography

Wing Commander John Young is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1989 and completed officer and pilot training in 1991. He is a command pilot with over 6500 flying hours, primarily in AP-3C Orion and Hawk 127 aircraft. He has twice been a Staff Officer, one tour each at the O4 and O5 level, and was the Deputy Air Component Commander – Australian Air Component, Middle East Area of Operations in 2010. His most recent posting was as the Commanding Officer of a Lead-in Fighter Training Squadron which trains the future fighter pilots of the Royal Australian Air Force.

Abstract

The increasing economic and geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region means that Australia must be prepared for all nature of contingencies in support of its national interests, and its international and alliance obligations. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) was an air force of limited strategic relevance for many years primarily due to the limitations of its existing weapon and support systems, and its lack of critical enabling capabilities. However, the RAAF has recently undergone significant reform and has undertaken an extensive program of upgrades and modernization to existing weapon systems, funded the acquisition of new weapon and support systems capable of conducting new roles and missions, and has made a determined effort to ensure that all these systems and platforms are integrated, and interoperable for Joint and Combined Operations. The US Quadrennial Defense Review details the broader policy for the US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region and further details how the US will have a higher expectation and deeper asks of those nations with which it has alliances. The weapon and support systems which have been acquired, and those which are still being acquired, have corrected RAAF capability and enabler deficiencies, and have provided the RAAF with an integrated, self-reliant, expeditionary power projection capability that is interoperable with alliance and coalition partners around the globe. Although this program is still underway, it has already transformed the RAAF into a force capable of asserting and achieving strategic influence to effect the aims of the Australian Government.

Introduction and Thesis

What qualities and capabilities make an Air Force strategic? How does an Air Force then use these strategic capabilities to have or exert influence? The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) was an air force of limited strategic relevance for many years primarily due to the limitations of its existing weapon and support systems, and its lack of critical enabling capabilities. However, the RAAF has recently undergone significant reform and has undertaken an extensive program of upgrades and modernization to existing weapon systems, funded the acquisition of new weapon and support systems capable of conducting new roles and missions, and has made a determined effort to ensure that all these systems and platforms are integrated and interoperable for Joint and Combined Operations. Although this program is still underway, it has already transformed the RAAF into a force capable of asserting and achieving strategic influence to effect the aims of the Australian Government. This paper will define strategic influence and explore the scope and context of the present and future Australian strategic environment. It will also explain why the Government needed to develop an air force capable of exerting strategic influence, and explain how the RAAF can achieve strategic influence as a consequence of its current and planned future capabilities, its levels of integration and interoperability with United States (US) and other Allied weapon systems, and its recent ability to conduct self-reliant expeditionary operations in support of Australian national interests within the Asia-Pacific region and around the globe.

Strategic Influence

Defining Strategic Influence

There are numerous definitions that could be used to define strategic influence but for the purpose of this paper, strategic influence is defined as a national government's ability to use the

tools and instruments of national power at its disposal to purposefully and deliberately affect the attitudes, opinions, behaviors and actions of both state and non-state entities, and to convince, compel or coerce them when required in the furtherance of its national interest. Therefore to produce strategic effects and have strategic influence, the RAAF must have the capability, capacity and flexibility to react or respond in space and time for the full spectrum of conflict, and also for Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations as directed by the Government in the pursuit of its strategic interests.

Criteria for assessing Strategic Influence

Having defined strategic influence, it is necessary to also determine what criteria should be used to determine whether or not the RAAF, as a tool of government, can aptly be described as being an air force capable of having or exerting strategic influence. Although many criteria are possible, essentially they can all be condensed down to capability and credibility. To be considered capable, an air force must have the ability to project air power through and from the air domain, and must be equipped with quality weapon and support systems, in sufficient quantities, that the threat of their employment can be used as an effective instrument of leverage by the Government. Having capable platforms does not however, also ensure credibility. To be considered credible an air force must be regarded, or at least perceived, as also having highly trained and motivated personnel with a willingness and proven ability to operate these weapon and support systems to their full capability. Weapons systems can only be as effective as the personnel that operate them. A reputation for credibility may be built over decades, or it may be earned based upon demonstrated performance during recent tensions or conflict. In the absence of conflict, reputation may also be based upon observed performance during exercises, or by assessing the 'on paper' potential capability of the weapons systems in combination with a

government's stated willingness to employ, and deploy, these forces in the pursuit of their national interests. Credibility may also be based in the recognition and acknowledgement provided to a particular nation, and by extension its air force, by its allies or respected world bodies. For example, Australia was designated by the United States as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 1989.¹ This recognition was reinforced in 2013 with the signing of the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program between Australia and NATO.² This agreement, which promises to further enhance Australia's relationship with NATO, was signed in recognition of the Government's, and in particular, the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) capable and continued contribution to the NATO International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

Strategic Environment

In order to make an assessment of whether or not the RAAF is an air force capable of strategic influence, it is also necessary to assess the strategic environment in which it may be tasked to operate. This is necessary because the strategic environment, present and future, will determine what capabilities, force structure, posture, and preparedness will be required in order for the RAAF to deal with strategic threats, exert strategic influence, and effect outcomes in accordance with national or collective interests.

The 2012 Government White Paper: *Australia in the Asian Century*, describes the 21st Century as the "Asian Century" due to Asia's strong economic growth and increasing

¹ Global Security. "Major non-NATO ally."

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/mnna.htm> (assessed 03 February 2015).

² Australia. Department of Defence. "Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program between Australia and NATO." Australian Government, 2010.

<http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/docs/Australia-NATO-Individual-Partnership-Cooperation-Program.pdf>

geostrategic and geopolitical importance.³ Within only a few years, Asia will not only be the world's largest producer of goods and services, it will also be the world's largest consumer of them. It is already the most populous region in the world, and in the near future, it will also be home to the majority of the world's Middle-Class.⁴ The Indian Ocean has surpassed the Atlantic and Pacific oceans as the world's busiest trade corridor.⁵ Rapid economic growth in South, North-East and South-East Asia (SEA) is driving stronger economic links with the resource-rich Middle-East and Africa. One-third of the world's bulk cargo and approximately two-thirds of global oil shipments now pass through the Indian Ocean.⁶

Whilst there are great opportunities for growth, there is also an increased likelihood of tension and dispute. Rising wealth and prosperity may lead to changes in the regional power balance as nations seek to capitalize and exert influence due to their improving circumstances. Long standing disputes, including those arising from competing territorial claims, with their associated resources implications vis-à-vis the provisions under the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS), have the potential to destabilize the region and to escalate to hostilities as nations are either emboldened by their greater military capability, or they feel threatened by other nations pursuing their own claims. Australia's prosperity is underpinned by its ability to trade throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, Australia has an enduring

³ Australia. Australian Government. "2012 Government White Paper. Australia in the Asian Century." Australian Government, 2012.
http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/verve/_resources/australia-in-the-asian-century-white-paper.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Lowie Institute. "Defence Challenges 2035: Securing Australia's Lifelines."
<http://www.lowyinstitute.com/files/defence-challenges-2035.pdf> (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

⁶ Hill, Cameron. "Australia in the Indo-Pacific century."
http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook44p/IndoPacific (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

strategic interest in the stability of the Indo-Pacific, in particular, South-East Asia and the maritime environment. Australia is a signatory to many bi-lateral and multi-lateral trade and defense agreements with nations involved in regional disputes, and actively works with the East Asian Summit, and the Association of South-East Asian Nations to ensure that these disputes are resolved peacefully.⁷ However, if diplomacy fails, Australia needs to be capable of taking an active role in peace and stability operations throughout the region. The RAAF will be an essential part of any Government strategy and is likely to be called upon as a ‘first responder’.

China has grown to be the world’s second largest economy and is increasingly engaged throughout the region and the world. It is now Australia’s largest trading partner with bilateral annual trade approaching US\$150 billion, nearly double that of the next four trading partners combined.⁸ China’s economic transformation has not only boosted the living standards of its own population, but has also done much to boost the economies of many countries throughout the Asia-Pacific.⁹ The United States (US) has been actively engaged in the Asian region for more than 70 years, but the rise of China is affecting the US-China power balance. The Defence White Paper 2013 states that “the relationship between the United States and China, the region’s and the globe’s two most powerful states, will more than any other single factor determine our

⁷ Australia. Australian Government. “2013 National Security Strategy. Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia’s National Security.” Australian Government, 2013, 28. http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/dpmc_nationalsecuritystrategy_jan2013.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

⁸ Japan, USA, Republic of Korea, and Singapore. Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. “Australia’s trade in goods and services 2012-13.” <http://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/trade-investment/australias-trade-in-goods-services-2012-13/Pages/australia-s-trade-in-goods-and-services-2012-13.aspx> (assessed 03 February 2015).

⁹ Australia. Australian Government. “2013 National Security Strategy”, 28.

strategic environment over coming decades.”¹⁰ The Government does not believe that Australia must choose between its longstanding Alliance with the United States and its expanding relationship with China; nor do the United States and China believe that it must make such a choice.¹¹ China and the US now have each other as their second largest bilateral trading partner.¹² Although political discourse between these two nations is sometime tense and there are differences of opinions and questions regarding each nation’s long term intentions, this economic interconnectedness and interdependence make this relationship significantly different from the power rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. Australia has maintained strong diplomatic and economic ties with China as it has grown and become more regionally and globally involved, even establishing a bilateral Free Trade Agreement. It can therefore play a major role in improving and expanding relations between the US and China. The Australian National Security Strategy also lists regional and global non-state threats including terrorism, extremism, weapons proliferation, transnational crime, illegal immigration, and illegal fishing as important considerations when considering and defining Australia’s strategic environment.¹³

The US Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) details the broader policy for the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific and further details how the US will have higher expectations and

¹⁰ Australia. Department of Defence. “2013 Defence White Paper - Defending Australia and its National Interests.” Australian Government, 2013, 2. http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Statista. “List of largest trading partners of China” <http://www.statista.com/statistics/270326/main-export-partners-for-china/> (Accessed 03 February 2015), and, United States Census Bureau. “Foreign Trade – US Top 10 Trading Partners.” <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/top/top1312yr.html> (accessed 03 February 2015).

¹³ Australia. Australian Government. “2013 National Security Strategy”, 11.

deeper asks of those nations with which it has alliances.¹⁴ There is no stronger relationship and alliance to Australia than that with the US. The Australian government has a vested interest in using this alliance, and other regional security partnerships, to increase stability in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁵

Why the Government embarked on the RAAF modernization program

Australia is a stable, prosperous, committed and responsible liberal democratic nation. The Government understands that if Australia is to be viewed as relevant by the international community, its voice must be heard, and it must be able to back these words with actions when necessary. Accordingly, the Government always strives to lead by example and is a highly engaged participant in many multilateral organizations.¹⁶ Australia was also a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the two year period from 1 Jan 2013 to 31 Dec 14. Australia's isolation was for many years considered to be an advantage; however, in today's globally interconnected world it can now be viewed more as a vulnerability. Australia

¹⁴ United States of America. Department of Defense. "Quadrennial Defense Review." United States Government, 2014, viii.
http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf (accessed 03 February 2015).

¹⁵ Australia. Australian Government. "2013 National Security Strategy. Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia's National Security." Australian Government, 2013, 22. http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/dpmc_nationalsecuritystrategy_jan2013.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

¹⁶ Organizations include: the United Nations, the G20, the World Trade Organization, the Commonwealth, the East Asian Summit, the Association of South-East Asian Nations Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Pacific Islands Forum. Indexmundi. "International organisations of which Australia is a member."
http://www.indexmundi.com/australia/international_organization_participation.html (assessed 03 February 2015).

has a \$1.6T GDP. In 2013 \$647B was derived from international trade.¹⁷ The effects of isolating Australia could threaten its interests as much, if not more, than a physical attack on Australia itself. Therefore, instead of finding ways to isolate Australia from the conflicts throughout its region and the world, the Government understands that it is in the national interest to become involved, when and where necessary, to protect its uninterrupted access to energy, trade, information, and the continued freedom of movement of its citizens and products throughout the world. Australia's security and prosperity are first and foremost linked to the Asia-Pacific region. Strengthening Australia's position as an influential regional actor is therefore a focus of foreign policy.¹⁸ The Government therefore needs the RAAF to be a capable and credible force, with sufficient capacity, to maintain order in the region and throughout the world, through force if necessary, either independently or as part of a Joint or Combined Force, to maintain Australia's inter-connectedness with the rest of world.

The Australian Defence Strategy has evolved from the "Defence of Australia" (1994), which involved purely the physical defence of Australia and the sea lines of communication to its immediate north, to "Defending Australia and its National Interests" (2013), which necessitates a flexible and adaptable expeditionary capable military with a force projection capability which can combat threats to Australian national interests wherever they may

¹⁷ Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. "Australia's trade in goods and services 2012-13." <http://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/trade-investment/australias-trade-in-goods-services-2012-13/Pages/australia-s-trade-in-goods-and-services-2012-13.aspx> (assessed 03 February 2015).

¹⁸ Australia. Australian Government. "2013 National Security Strategy. Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia's National Security." Australian Government, 2013, 23. http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/dpmc_nationalsecuritystrategy_jan2013.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

originate.¹⁹ Australia interacts globally, therefore it needs to be able to defend its interests globally.²⁰ This may be unilateral, or may be conducted as part of a coalition or alliance depending on the nature of the threat. Australia relies on a well-functioning and predictable rules-based globalised world for its prosperity and security, and also as its mechanism of choice for resolving differences.²¹ The Government expects the RAAF to have the capability and capacity to deter and defeat armed attacks on Australia, contribute to stability and security in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste, contribute to military contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region, with priority given to SEA, and contribute to military contingencies in support of global security.²² The current and expected future strategic environment necessitated that the government restructure, re-equip and reform the RAAF to meet these challenges.

¹⁹ Australia. Department of Defence. “1994 Defence White Paper – Defending Australia.” Australian Government, 1994.
<http://www.defence.gov.au/SE/publications/wpaper/1994.pdf> (accessed 03 Feb 2015), and, Australia. Department of Defence. “2013 Defence White Paper - Defending Australia and its National Interests.” Australian Government, 2013, 2.
http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

²⁰ Australia. Department of Defence. Australian Defence Doctrine Publication (ADDP 3.D) “Joint Operations for the 21st Century.”, iii.
<http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/docs/FJOC.pdf> (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

²¹ Australia. Australian Government. “2013 National Security Strategy. Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia’s National Security.” Australian Government, 2013, 20. http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/dpmc_nationalsecuritystrategy_jan2013.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

²² Australia. Department of Defence. “2013 Defence White Paper - Defending Australia and its National Interests.” Australian Government, 2013, 28.
http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

The Modern Air Force

Transition from old to new

In 2009, the RAAF consisted of an aging fleet of operational aircraft that although well maintained, upgraded and modernized, had still been in service for many decades. Key enablers including air-to-air refuelling and AEWAC were non-existent, most capabilities were not integrated, and the levels of Joint and Combined interoperability were poor. The average age of the operational aircraft fleet exceeded 30 years. Critically, many of these aircraft had a Planned Withdrawal Date between 2010 and 2015. Unless efforts were made to modernize the RAAF, the growth and modernization of military powers throughout South Asia and SEA risked creating an ever increasing capability differential, and a change to the regional military balance of power, which could leave the RAAF incapable of exerting the strategic influence required by the Government.

Since 2009, the transformation of the RAAF into an air force that is capable of power projection, and being an effective tool of strategic influence, has been rapid and purposeful. A number of projects were undertaken to introduce weapon and support systems into service that would enhance existing capabilities, and importantly, correct identified capability and enabler deficiencies. Being a nation of just 24 million people and with limited defence budgets of approximately \$27 billion per annum, it was imperative that these new systems would increase capability, could be fully integrated to achieve maximum flexibility and effectiveness, and would be interoperable with the other services and alliance partners.²³ Furthermore, they must be

²³ Australia. Minister for Defence. "Budget 2014-15 – Defence Budget Overview." <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2014/05/13/minister-for-defence-budget-2014-15-defence-budget-overview/> (Accessed 03 February 2015).

deployable throughout the broadest extent of the strategic operating environment in the pursuit of national interests.

The QDR explains that the centrepiece of the Departments of Defense's commitment to the US government's rebalance to the Asia-Pacific continues to be the efforts to enhance and modernize security alliances with Australia and other South Asian and South-East Asian nations to increase interoperability and ensure regional stability.²⁴ Australia's location and close political ties with the US make it an important strategic partner that can work closely with the US to promote, and if necessary, maintain peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia does not receive economic or military aid from the US, however, it is regarded as a close trusted ally and does benefit from the advantages arising from the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) alliance, and the Australia-United States Defence Trade Cooperation Treaty.²⁵ The strength of the Australia-United States alliance cannot be overstated and the Government's acquisition policy was heavily biased to being interoperable, and even common with the US. Therefore, although some new weapons systems were purchased from non-US companies, the vast majority were purchased from the US, many through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Military-Off-The-Shelf (MOTS) contracts. This resulted in greatly reduced acquisition timetables, reduced cost, and unprecedented levels of interoperability and commonality, all of

²⁴ United States of America. Department of Defense. "Quadrennial Defense Review." United States Government, 2014, 16.
http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf (accessed 03 February 2015).

²⁵ Strategic Studies Institute. "The Other Special Relationship: The United States and Australia at the Start of the 21st Century." 2007.
<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=760> (accessed 03 February 2015).

which are of great benefit to Australia in its pursuit of mutual regional security and stability aims alongside the US.²⁶

Current and Planned Capabilities – Interoperable, Common and Expeditionary

The RAAF Air Power Manual details the core air power roles as – Control of the Air, Air Mobility, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), and Strike.²⁷ The RAAFs Control of the Air capability and capacity was greatly increased in 2010 with the acquisition of two squadrons of F/A18F Super Hornet and a squadron of E/A18 Growler as a stopgap capability pending the introduction of the F35 later this decade. Air Mobility capability and capacity were increased with purchase of additional C17 and the acquisition of a squadron of C27. ISR and Command and Control capabilities were introduced with the acquisition of a squadron of E7/A AEWAC in 2010 and will be further enhanced with the introduction of the P-8 and the MQ-4C in the next few years.²⁸ The Control of the Air, Air Mobility and ISR capabilities have all been significantly enhanced to true expeditionary capability by the acquisition of a squadron of KC30-A Multi-Role Tanker Transports. Notwithstanding the aforementioned weapons systems' ability to exert strategic influence individually during hostilities or HA/DR operations, there is perhaps no greater lever of strategic influence than possessing the ability to strike another nation's territory, or its interests. Strike operations can now be conducted using integrated strike packages using any combination of these aircraft. The RAAF can now deliver a diverse variety

²⁶ United States of America. Department of Defense. "Joint Publication 3-16 Multi-National Operations, 16 July 2013." pages I6-I9.

http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_16.pdf (accessed 03 February 2015).

²⁷ Australia. Royal Australian Air Force. Air Power Development Centre. The Air Power Manual. Tuggeranong, A.C.T.: Air Power Development Centre, 2013, 44.

²⁸ Flight Global. "USN contracts for first four Australian P-8As." <http://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/usn-contracts-for-first-four-australian-p-8as-403059/> (assessed 03 February 2015), and, Flight Global. "Australia to buy MQ-4C Triton." <http://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/australia-to-buy-mq-4c-triton-396964/> (assessed 03 February 2015).

of weapons, with high levels of precision, lethality, mission flexibility and survivability, whilst maintaining greater levels of command and control, and situational awareness, even in highly contested environments. The vast majority of the RAAF operational fleet is now under 10 years of age with most being less than five years of age. A considerable percentage of purchased aircraft are yet to even enter service. The acquisition of these weapon and support systems has transitioned the RAAF into a capable, self-reliant, expeditionary force that can be used to enhance security, preserve the rule-of-law, and effectively conduct both HA/DR and high-end military operations in the region and around the world.²⁹ For example, E7-A are currently deployed to the Middle-East together with KC30-A and F/A18F to conduct operations against ISIL. The operation is being supported by C130J and C17 aircraft. This operation is the most recent example of the Government's commitment to international security, and demonstrates the RAAFs new ability to conduct self-reliant, expeditionary operations throughout the world in support of its allies and coalition partners. The operation further demonstrates that these new forces can be used either independently, or with 'plug and play' functionally during coalition and alliance operations when necessary to exert strategic influence and achieve Australian strategic objectives.

To be a credible force capable of strategic influence, acquisitions needed to increase capability in all Air Power roles to defend Australia and its interests, and also needed to be compatible and interoperable with the forces of allied and aligned nations when required. Two key factors were identified as being necessary for this to occur. Firstly, a fundamental change in

²⁹ Similar modernization and capability improvement programs are underway for the Royal Australian Navy. These have resulted in the acquisition of new equipment including AEGIS capable Air Warfare Destroyers (AWDs) and Landing Helicopter Decks (LHDs). These assets will be fully interoperable with the RAAF fleet and will greatly enhance the ADFs Joint Operations Capability, its Air-Sea and Air-Land integration, and its force projection capabilities throughout the region.

the traditional acquisition strategy away from seeking to modify and customize weapon and support systems to ‘Australianise’ them, to purchases under FMS and MOTS. This ensured that weapon systems could be introduced quickly, would have the highest levels of through-life integration and interoperability, address current and future risks, and would be significantly more affordable and sustainable. This is now the model that will be used for most, if not all, future weapons systems purchases.³⁰

The second key factor by which to ensure integration and interoperability, and therefore the potential to exert maximum strategic influence, was the strict adherence to meeting the technical and other requirements determined by the multi-nation standardization and interoperability groups of which the RAAF is a member. These groups provide a forum to work towards standardization of national equipment, doctrine, and Tactics, Techniques and Procedures. They include the Five Nation’s Air and Space Interoperability Council, and the Seven Nation’s Multinational Interoperability Council.³¹ These groups ensure interoperability with Australia’s major allies, and also provide cascading benefits to other aligned nations with which Australia works under different arrangements including those of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).³² Australia, and the RAAF, may not always be capable of exerting strategic influence unilaterally, particularly against a great power the size of China or India, or against a coalition of nations united against an Australian interest. For this reason, it is essential that the RAAF is not only capable and credible in its own right, but that it can integrate into, and

³⁰ Statement made by AVM Kindler at conclusion of Super Hornet Airworthiness Board, Canberra, 2010

³¹ Five Nation’s comprised of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States, and, Seven Nation’s comprised of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom and the United States.

³² Five Power Defence Arrangements comprised of Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

be interoperable with, regional coalitions or alliance partners to pursue a common interest or act against a common foe. Australia now maintains at least compatibility with aligned nations, including those of the FPDA, but aims to achieve high levels of interoperability and even commonality with its allies, particularly the US.

The Government and the RAAF were presented with a unique set of circumstances that benefitted the acquisition costs, quantities and timeline. Following the Global Financial Crisis Australia was one of only a small number of countries not to go into recession.³³ It maintained strong export markets in Asia with favourable balances of trade, and perhaps most importantly, experienced exceptionally favourable exchange rate with the US.³⁴ This made planned acquisitions cheaper than originally budgeted, afforded the opportunity to expand the size of acquisitions whilst maintaining the original purchase price, and also facilitated the initiation of new acquisitions.³⁵ These conditions have endured. The Government is expected to announce the purchase of an addition two KC30/A tankers and at least two additional C17 with the release of the 2015 Defence White Paper, further enhancing the RAAFs global resource and power projection capabilities.³⁶ These acquisitions will significantly increase the RAAFs capacity, and

³³ OECD. Statistics extracts. "Nations avoiding recession due to Global Financial Crisis." <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryName=350&QueryType=View&Lang=en#> (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

³⁴ AUS/US exchange rate peaked at AUS\$1.00 = US\$1.108 in July 2011. Oanda. "Historical Australian Dollar exchange rate." <http://www.oanda.com/currency/historical-rates/> (accessed 03 February 2015).

³⁵ Two additional C-17 Globemaster aircraft were purchased in addition to the original four for approximately the same dollar amount, and the Super Hornet purchase of 24 aircraft, 12 of which were 'fitted for but not with' EA18 Growler capability, expanded to 24 Super Hornet and 12 dedicated E/A18 Growler.

³⁶ Australian Aviation. "Defence Minister flags additional KC-30s, C-17s." <http://australianaviation.com.au/2014/08/defence-minister-flags-additional-kc-30s-c-17s/> (accessed 03 February 2015).

importantly, will increase the overall number of assets in the region that can be contributed to coalition or alliance operations if the need should arise.

The potential of the RAAF in the Asia Pacific

The US government has announced its intention to rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific. Whilst this is intended to be a whole-of-government effort, due to the US military being more responsive and adaptive than other government departments, it has taken the lead and has already relocated forces to the region including up to 2,500 Marines in Darwin, Australia, and basing ships in Singapore.³⁷ This has the effect of militarizing the rebalance effort which in turn may raise tensions in the region as nations not aligned with the US consider what they should do to counter these efforts. The US rebalance is occurring at a time when the US military is drawing down from over two decades of operations in the Middle East and the military is faced with decreasing defense budgets and the looming threat of sequestration.³⁸ The rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is also being hampered by resurgent actions in other parts of the world requiring actual or possible US military intervention, including the operations against ISIS, and the tensions in the Ukraine.

The care taken to ensure that the RAAF would be transformed into a modern and interoperable force benefits Australia and also the aligned and Allied nations in the region. The RAAFs enhanced Air Power capabilities, coupled with its newly acquired expeditionary

³⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies. "U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region – An Independent Assessment." 2012, 31.

http://csis.org/files/publication/120814_FINAL_PACOM_optimized.pdf (accessed 03 Feb 2015), and, United States of America. U.S. Department of Defense. "Department of Defense's June 2, 2012, Joint Statement of the U.S.-Republic of Singapore Meeting at Shangri-La." <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15337> (accessed 03 February 2015).

³⁸ The average age profile of the US aircraft fleet is similar to that of the RAAF pre-2009 and Department of Defense is competing with all other departments to get precious tax payer dollars to fund the acquisition and modernization programs for its aging fleet.

capability, means that it is now capable of taking a more active role in ensuring peace and security in the region, particularly throughout Oceania and South East Asia. The RAAF and the Royal Australian Navy are well suited to augment, or on occasion, even replace US forces, in conducting efforts to ensure stability in the region. Arguably, given the healthy state of Australia's regional diplomatic and economic relations, coupled with regional military cooperation programs, Australia and the RAAF may be even better positioned than the US to take on a leadership role in the region without adversely and overtly affecting the regional power balance. The Asia Pacific could be described as a region containing an interconnected web of overlapping treaties and alliances. Australia has treaties with nations that the US does not, and visa-versa. Collectively this is to every nation's advantage, but importantly, it means that Australia may have greater strategic influence with some nations than the US. Further advantage and leverage may be gained through a number of treaties which Australia has ratified but which the US has not, including UNCLOS.³⁹ As previously mentioned, the Australian Government endeavors to be involved using 'seat at the table' diplomacy and has historically maintained an active effort to demonstrate strategic leadership and build relationships and partnership with regional nations. The RAAF as a responsive tool of government, has and will play a major role in the development and maintenance of these relationships. Although diplomacy will hopefully always prevail over hostility, the RAAF is now structured and equipped to exert strategic influence as a tool of diplomacy, or as an instrument of coercion or action.

³⁹ United Nations. "Oceans and Law of the Sea – United Nations." http://www.un.org/Depts/los/reference_files/chronological_lists_of_ratifications.htm (accessed 03 February 2015).

Exercises and Engagement

Alliances are between governments. Militaries interact through defense cooperation programs which include exercises, operations, exchanges, and access to academic schools and other training institutions. The RAAF may not always be capable of exerting strategic influence on its own, and so must be able to work as part of a Joint or Combined Force. Therefore it needs to maintain high levels of interoperability with regional forces and the US. Compatible equipment is an essential prerequisite, but the key to interoperability is mutual understanding and regular mission rehearsal. The establishment of the Joint Combined Training Capability (JCTC) with the US is an “initiative designed to enhance high-end bi-lateral training, increase and measure operational capability, improve interoperability, and facilitate capability development.”⁴⁰ This close relationship with the US brings considerable benefits to the RAAF, but is also an integral component of the US Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific.⁴¹ Participation in the US Schriever War Games, along with a limited number of NATO countries, affords the opportunity to add the domain of space into RAAF mission preparation and rehearsal.⁴² The RAAF also participates in, and regularly hosts, bilateral and multilateral exercises with the US, and a number of SEA nations including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan and Thailand, in addition to nations throughout Oceania. The US also conducts separate exercises with these nations, and also with the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan. Even if one nation is not fortunate enough to exercise with one or more of its regional neighbours, due to the overlapping bilateral and multilateral exercises, it should at least be able to exercise with a nation

⁴⁰ Lord, Carnes., and Erickson, Andrew. *Rebalancing US Forces – Basing and Forward Presence in the Asia-Pacific*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014, 103

⁴¹ Ibid., 102-107.

⁴² NATO. “Schriever War Game 2012 International.” <http://www.act.nato.int/schriever-wargame-2012-international> (accessed 03 February 2015).

that does. These exercises with likeminded nations build trust, increase preparedness, and provide the RAAF, and its allies, opportunities to demonstrate their capability, potential and professionalism to each other, and to any would-be adversaries in the region.⁴³

Recommendations

The ability to exert strategic influence can be transitory if not carefully managed. Now that the RAAF has been transformed into a capable tool of leverage, it is essential that this is maintained and sustained, and that it remains effective and affordable. The Government mandated Strategic Reform Program (SRP) has resulted in actual savings of \$2 billion per annum since 2009. The 10 year program will result in an additional \$20 billion being available purely to fund future acquisitions.⁴⁴ In a time of fiscal restraint, when many militaries around the world are suffering from cut-backs and downsizing, SRP has enabled the Government to rapidly modernize the RAAF, increase its size and capacity, and grow the Defence budget in real terms to achieve the “Force 2030 Structure”.⁴⁵ The strength of the active duty ADF will increase from 54000 to 59000 by 2019 and the Defence budget will increase from 1.8% to 2.0% of GDP by 2023.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the reform measures which facilitated the modernization process must be continued and even enhanced.

The strategic environment is only going to get more complex. Economic interconnectedness may lessen the chances of hostilities, but increasingly capable militaries and

⁴³ The RAAF recently led a Combined Search and Rescue (SAR) operation for the missing Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 which is believed to have crashed in the Indian Ocean. The Combined SAR operation searched far into the Indian and Southern Oceans and involved aircraft from the Australia, the US, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, and Malaysia.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵ Australia. Department of Defence. “The Strategic Reform Program 2009: Delivering Force 2030.” Australian Government, 2009, 9.
<http://www.defence.gov.au/publications/reformbooklet.pdf> (accessed 03 Feb 2015).

⁴⁶ Australia. Department of Defence. “The Strategic Reform Program 2009”, 28.

competition for resources may increase the chances. The rise of China and other Asian economies, coupled with the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific will stress the regional balance of power and may result in undesirable interactions between states. Continued and expanded defense cooperation and regional engagement in the form of increased exchanges and exercises will be an essential component for ensuring that the region remains peaceful, but is also prepared for conflict. The RAAF is now even better structured and equipped to continue its leadership and support roles, and should continue to be used by the Government in these endeavors.

Finally, it must be remembered that “the price of freedom is eternal vigilance”, so political and defense leaders must strive for continuous improvement with respect to their abilities for assessing and treating future risks and threats.⁴⁷ The current RAAF has a good balance of quality and quantity, and is well placed to deal with both anticipated and unanticipated eventualities; however, awareness and attention must be maintained to ensure that this endures.

Conclusion

The increasing economic and geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region means that Australia must be prepared for all nature of contingencies in support of its national interests, and its international and alliance obligations. Strategic influence can be enhanced through and by strategic leadership. Australia seeks legitimacy and exerts its strategic influence through its actions, its example, and its willing and dedicated involvement with the United Nations and with its allies. The RAAF is an integral tool with which the government can exert strategic influence. The weapon and support systems which have been acquired, and those which are still being

⁴⁷ Jefferson, Thomas. <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/4949.html> (accessed 01 Feb 2015).

acquired, have corrected capability and enabler deficiencies, and have provided the RAAF with an integrated, self-reliant, expeditionary power projection capability that is interoperable with alliance and coalition partners around the globe. Australian is not a Great Power, but it is a significant regional power. The RAAF is now arguably the most capable air force in SEA, and with the exceptions of the US, China and Japan, is arguably also the next most capable air force in the wider Asia-Pacific region. The RAAF is now capable of greater leadership and partnership responsibilities within the region.

The RAAF was an Air Force of limited strategic relevance for many years primarily due to the limitations of its existing weapon and support systems, and the lack of critical enabling capabilities. However, it has recently undergone significant reform and has undertaken an extensive program of upgrades and modernization to existing weapon systems, funded the acquisition of new systems and technologies capable of conducting new roles and missions, and has made a determined effort to ensure that all these systems and platforms are integrated and interoperable for Joint and Combined Operations. Although this program is still underway, it has already transformed the RAAF into a force capable of asserting and achieving strategic influence to effect the aims of the Australian Government.

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